

# The Internationalisation of Nationalism and the Mainstreaming of Hate – The Rise of the Far Right in Poland



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Once Europe's most multi-cultural country, Poland is nowadays the most homogenous nation-state on the continent. Ethnic minorities amount to less than 2 per cent of the population, yet the ethno-nationalist populist radical right has been gaining strength.

The annual march on the occasion of Polish National Independence Day (11 November) provides a spectacular illustration of the rapid rise of the far right's social base as well as its extremist ideological background rooted in the radical nationalist traditions of the 1930s. The march is co-organised by two extreme-right youth groups, the National-Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR) and the All-Polish Youth (Młodzież Wszechpolska, MW), both of which take their names and ideological inspirations from radical nationalist organisations active before World War II. The pre-war versions of the ONR and MW were known for their violent anti-Semitism and attacks on leftist opponents. They were clearly inspired by key features of the then fascist movements active in other European countries and – although they never seized power in Poland on the state level – they gained some significant support among the young generation, especially in the wake of the economic crisis of the early and mid-1930s. It is not accidental that contemporary organisations, active in the 21st century, have adopted the pre-war ideologies and symbols.

The first of the series of marches took place in 2009 when a group of several hundred young nationalists demonstrated in the centre of Warsaw. In 2010, the march was already considerably larger, having attracted support from some well-known right-wing figures such as the columnist Rafał Ziemkiewicz. The author of this article conducted participant observation of the march and the anti-fascist counter-protest: the far-right demonstration brought together around 3,000 participants, which seemed a relatively large number. That, however, was just the beginning of the event's growth, as it grew every year: in the last years the number of participants has been estimated at around 50,000 to 100,000, making it by far the biggest annual far-right gathering in Europe and, in fact, in the world.

The march continued to attract growing numbers of participants over the years, despite the violence to which it routinely led: physical attacks against policemen, journalists, political opponents, and members of various minorities accompanied the demonstrations' radical nationalist messages, directed against minorities, foreigners, and political opponents. According to records of the 'NEVER AGAIN' Association, in 2010 demonstrators chanted: 'Roman Dmowski – Poland's saviour!' (Dmowski is the founding father of Polish ethno-nationalism), 'Great Catholic Poland', 'Instead of leaves, Communists will hang on trees', 'Treat the red rabble with a sickle and a hammer'. Members of the Polish Nation's Sovereignty (SNP) movement carried a banner: 'You sold Poland in the Lisbon Treaty' (a misspelling of 'Lisbon' as the authors of the banner probably intended a reference to 'Lesbians' to demonstrate their homophobia) while Sławomir Zakrzewski, their leader, shouted to anti-nationalist counter-demonstrators: 'You must have come from Tel Aviv' and 'Shalom Aleichem'. Flags carried by far-right participants depicted King Chrobry's sword (a symbol of Poland's far right movement) and a Celtic cross (a racist symbol of White Power). Anti-fascist demonstrators tried to block the march using tactics borrowed from the annual anti-Nazi mobilisations in Dresden. The counter-demonstration was organised by a coalition of over 40 progressive organisations. There were violent clashes between the police and both groups of demonstrators. Piotr Ikonowicz (a former leader of the Polish Socialist Party) received a head injury. The nationalists were forced to change the route but the march went ahead. The Independence March ended near the Dmoski monument. Participants shouted at counter-demonstrators: 'Faggots, faggots!'

Since then, homophobic discourse has been a permanent feature of the march, culminating in the infamous burning of the rainbow arch in Warsaw's central Saviour Square on 11 November 2013. Demonstrators had set fire to the artistic installation, viewing it as a symbol of the emancipation of sexual minorities. The participants disrupted the work of firefighters, throwing stones and flares at them.

The spectacular burning of the rainbow was met with approval from right-wing media and politicians. In September 2014, the National Radio and TV Council issued a 50,000 zloty fine to the Lux Veritatis Foundation, the owner of the Catholic-nationalist television channel TV Trwam, for 'propagating the unlawful actions' of Father Piotr Dettlaff and Dr. Krzysztof Kawęcki, who in a live show reported the events from Zbawiciela Square as the rainbow was burning. The Council justified their decision by saying: 'The material along with the comments could have given the impression that the host and his guest approved such actions.' About the men who had set the arch on fire, Dettlaff had said: 'those people are not accepting attacks on the foundations of the Polish family; they want a healthy Polish family, normal relations between a man and a woman', while Kawęcki added: 'Yes, they oppose the deviations imposed on us. That rainbow cannot be a symbol of Warsaw [...]. This is horrifying – the rainbow right in front of the Saviour's Church.' Also on 11 November 2013, Bartosz Kownacki, a Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)) MP, commented via Facebook following the arson incident: 'The faggots' rainbow on Zbawiciela Square is burning.' He added: '[The mayor of Warsaw] has spent a hundred thousand to renovate it! How many hungry children could be fed with that money? But she would rather promote faggotry.' Following complaints from Facebook users, the company removed the posts as content 'inciting hatred'.

The burning of the rainbow in 2013 became a source of pride for the march leaders who referred to it in the next years. On 11 November 2014, a visiting French extreme-right leader referred to the incident in his speech to the march participants: 'Burning rainbows are a sign of hope for Poland and for Europe.' Another speaker, Robert Winnicki, the leader of the Nationalist Movement (Ruch Narodowy, RN), said: 'The more rainbows burn in Europe, the better.'

A glance at the annual march shows that the bulk of its participants are young males, often recruited through the networks of football fans. Announcements of the march are frequently displayed in Polish stadiums in the weeks before the event, and members of organised football fan groups are bussed from across the country, seemingly without opposition or condemnation by institutions such as the Polish Football Association whose chairman, the ex-football star Zbigniew Boniek, is popular among many right-wing fans. Clearly, Polish football culture has been permeated by the ideology of nationalism and xenophobia, as illustrated by frequent anti-refugee and anti-Muslim chants and banners in league stadiums. The football fan groups have brought with them certain rituals – their social movement's performative repertoire – such as the spectacular usage of flares (fireworks) against the dark sky. The march is held in the afternoon and in recent years it has ended in a rally next to the National Stadium.

Due to its size and its images distributed globally through social media and, especially, YouTube the event has also become a magnet for right-wing extremists and neo-fascist groups from other countries, thus contributing to a paradoxical 'internationalisation of nationalism'. Flags of other nations can be seen alongside hundreds of Polish national flags at the march. Already in 2011, the 'NEVER AGAIN' Association registered the presence of nationalists from Italy (Forza Nuova), Spain (Democracia Nacional), Sweden (Nordisk Ungdom), Hungary (Jobbik and Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom), Serbia (Srpski Narodni Pokret 1389), Slovakia (Slovenské Hnutie Obrody), the Czech Republic (Autonomní nacionalisté), Ukraine (UNA-UNSO), Belarus (Swoboda), and Lithuania (Autonomous Nationalists). In 2014, the participants included delegations from Spain (Democracia Nacional) and France (Renouveau Français). More foreign groups have joined the march in subsequent years, making it a truly international gathering.

Roberto Fiore, for example, was a keynote speaker during the Polish Independence Day march in 2016. As a European political leader, Fiore is unique: he was convicted of involvement in terrorist activities in the wake of the Bologna railway station bombing in 1980, when the neo-fascist Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari murdered 85 innocent people. He managed to escape to Lebanon and, later, to Great Britain where curiously he was able to establish himself as a businessman and leader of another neo-fascist group, the International Third Position. When his sentence expired, he returned to Italy and founded yet another extreme-right formation, Forza Nuova (FN). In 2008-2009, Fiore briefly became a Member of the European Parliament, replacing Alessandra Mussolini, the granddaughter of the founder of Italian fascism.

The choice of Fiore, a convicted fascist terrorist, as a special guest during Poland's Independence Day celebration is of course rather extraordinary, but there are numerous other far-right activists who descend on Warsaw each November. The biggest foreign group is routinely composed of the members of Hungary's extreme right party, Jobbik, which has served as the main source of inspiration for RN, the political party created by members of the MW and ONR in 2014. Gábor Vona, Jobbik's leader, was a star speaker at the Warsaw march in 2013. Members of both

parties frequently meet at trainings and festivals throughout the year, and the Hungarian influence was clearly felt in RN's tactics, for example its local anti-Roma campaigns and attempts to join anti-government riots linked to revelations of secret recordings of liberal ministers in 2014, reminiscent of the Budapest riots in 2006.

A smaller, but also visible group present at the recent Independence Day marches is composed of activists of the *Ludová strana Naše Slovensko* (People's Party Our Slovakia). One of its leaders, Milan Mazurek, delivered a speech at the 2016 march. The cooperation between Polish and Slovak fascist groups goes beyond the Warsaw marches; for example, in October 2017 the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* reported joint paramilitary activities (including shooting practice) held by the ONR and its Slovak counterparts on the Slovak side of the border. While the Slovak and the Hungarian nationalists have a traditionally antagonistic relationship, they seem content to participate in the annual event organised by their mutual allies in Poland. However, rival allegiances and international connections have also led to friction, most notably around the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. During the 2016 march, a Ukrainian flag was burned and a physical confrontation between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian factions of Polish nationalists was reported.

In the run-up to the 2017 march, Polish media reported two significant figures on the international far-right spectrum were preparing to travel to Warsaw for the event: Richard Spencer is the founder of the US-based National Policy Institute who reportedly coined the label 'alt-right', a newly fashionable self-description of extreme-right elements and internet trolls. Spencer became notorious after the 2016 US presidential election when filmed exclaiming 'Hail Trump!' and, additionally, after the 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, which resulted in clashes and the killing of a female anti-racist protester by a far-right activist. The Charlottesville rally itself resembled the model of the Polish Independence Day marches. Interestingly, in 2014 Spencer had been deported from Hungary and condemned personally by the country's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Protests against Spencer's Polish visit were voiced in the media by the 'NEVER AGAIN' Association and the American Jewish Committee, which led to the Polish Foreign Ministry officially criticising the planned visit.

The second foreign leader reportedly planning to join the Independence Day march in 2017 was Stephen Lennon a.k.a. Tommy Robinson, the notorious founder of the anti-Muslim street movement English Defence League. The fact of Spencer's and Lennon's interest in participating in the Warsaw event testifies to the globalised nature of contemporary extreme-right networks, which – though preaching nationalist ideas – subscribe to a shared imagery. Islamophobic slogans occupy an increasingly central role in the transnational discourse of the global far right. Through the 11 November marches, Warsaw has become one of the capitals of the international anti-Muslim movement. The 11 November 2015 march in particular emphasised its anti-Muslim character. The slogans on banners included 'Stop the Islamisation of Poland', crossed-through symbols of mosques and crescents, along with racist symbols of the Celtic Cross. At the end of the march, at the stage in front of the National Stadium, Father Jacek Międlar spoke to the crowds: 'We don't want Allah in Poland, we don't want rapes, lynchings, or terror. We don't want the hate which is contained in Koran but the love and truth of the Gospel!'

Importantly, the far-right marches in Warsaw have enjoyed an increased legitimacy since 2015 when the newly elected President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, addressed a letter to the march participants praising the event and its participants. The letter stopped short of any criticism of the event and eulogised 'the young passionate Polish hearts' of the marchers. It was read at the beginning of the march (and repeated in 2016) as an important illustration of the increasing mainstreaming of radical nationalism in Polish politics and society.

Far from being condemned or marginalised, the far right march has been praised and legitimised by the right-wing political elite. The leader of the ruling PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, has never physically participated in the marches, but many other lawmakers have taken part in the march over the years, including Professor Jan Żaryn, currently a member of the Senate and PiS's main authority on issues of so-called 'historical policy'. History as a tool of politics has become a common theme on the Polish right, and – characteristically – numerous reconstructionist groups, dressed in historical uniforms, take part in the annual march. The president's letter as well as the participation of members of the ruling party and the favourable coverage of the march by the main right-wing media illustrate the blurring of ideological distinction between the 'mainstream' and the 'radical' populist right in Poland, especially in the post-2015 social and political landscape.

The year 2015 brought about a radical restructuring of Polish politics both in the institutional sense of presidential and parliamentary elections and on the level of political discourse; ideas and sentiments previously considered

'radical' or 'extreme' entered the mainstream. The government- controlled state media (radio and television) have been particularly eager to air nationalist views demonising refugees, Muslims, human-rights NGOs, and other groups.

The refugee crisis in the Mediterranean in the summer of 2015 did not directly affect Poland. Nevertheless, it was omnipresent in the media and, importantly, coincided with the parliamentary electoral campaign during which several right-wing and far-right parties competed with each other in using xenophobic rhetoric and exploiting the refugee issue, alleging a threat to Polish national identity. The imagined threat became a key topic in the campaign, and it has remained on the political agenda ever since. In the wake of Islamist terrorist attacks in Western European countries, the opposition to accepting refugees in Poland has been firmly linked in the public debate to the question of 'security'.

Public opinion proved susceptible to manipulation by the political class, and public attitudes on the refugee issue changed dramatically. Previously, Poles had been generally sympathetic to refugees (xenophobic attacks against tens of thousands of Chechen refugees who came to Poland in the late 1990s and early 2000s were relatively rare, and the PiS at the time was the most pro-refugee political party in the parliament), but since 2015 opinion polls have shown a majority against admitting refugees on Polish territory. In a July 2017 poll conducted by Polityka weekly and the IBRIS Institute, a surprising 51-per cent majority even agreed that Poland should leave the EU if it insists on relocating refugees to Poland.

Clearly, the nationalist-populist messages found a fertile soil in widespread prejudice and stereotypes. Anti-Islamic attitudes have long been present in Polish media and society, especially since the 11 September attacks in the USA and the Polish involvement in the invasion of Iraq. Still, until 2015 Islamophobia was not dominant in mainstream political discourse as a tool in domestic campaigns.

Alarmingly, xenophobic attitudes have become especially predominant among the younger generation. Ethno-nationalism has appeared in numerous forms of youth culture, for example in Polish hip-hop.

Overall, younger voters have been displaying right-wing preferences more than their parents. Clearly, socio-economic issues play an important role in the current rise of nationalism among Polish youth, but purely economic problems seem insufficient as an explanation. Neoliberalism has contributed to the rise of the far right in a variety of ways, including the imposition of a Social Darwinist mindset. While the material hardship suffered by many young people is real, the global economic crisis did not affect the Polish economy on the same scale as many other countries in Europe. Therefore, the accompanying issues of identity, ideology, and values – the cultural resources – play an especially important role.

The case of rock star Paweł Kukiz shows how cultural influence can be translated into political capital. The author of important songs against intolerance in the 1980s and 1990s, he became a politician in 2015 and built a populist movement named after himself: Kukiz'15, which won almost 10 per cent of the parliamentary seats. It allied itself with RN, which enabled hard-line nationalists to enter parliament. Today RN's leader, 32-year-old Robert Winnicki (who has split from Kukiz's faction), is a vocal representative of the extreme right in the parliamentary chamber, while Kukiz'15 is campaigning for a Hungarian-style referendum on the refugee question. Kukiz'15 positions itself as a more radically nationalist alternative to the PiS, but it has voted with the ruling party in several important votes dismantling the liberal democratic constitutional order. According to opinion polls, Kukiz'15 has been consistently named as the most popular electoral option among the youngest voters.

The current situation has some obvious parallels to the years 2005-2007 when the previous PiS-led government, supported by two smaller populist- nationalist groups, provoked a wave of protests by civil society and was eventually ousted in an early election. The current crisis of democracy in Poland is arguably more serious, not least due to the genuine popularity of xenophobic nationalism among the young, which confronts anti-fascist and progressive groups in Polish society with a difficult challenge.

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<https://www.transform-network.net/publications/yearbook/overview/article/yearbook-2018/the-internationalisation-of-nationalism-and-the-mainstreaming-of-hate-the-rise-of-the-far-right-in/>